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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CONAKRY 000127

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [KDEM](#) [GV](#)  
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT CONTE LIVES IN ANOTHER WORLD

Classified By: Ambassador Jackson McDonald. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) On February 1, I met for nearly an hour with Guinean President Lansana Conte. The conversation was disjointed, with Conte frequently digressing and going off on tangents. He minimized the importance of the recent general strike, including the use of lethal force against civilian protesters on January 22. He would not engage on political questions such as the appointment of a prime minister and the need to build national consensus. Conte was alert, but, as usual, his level of discourse remained very basic. This conversation was frustrating; I was trying to talk about ways out of the current crisis with a human relic whose time has long since passed. End Summary.

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SETTING  
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¶2. (C) President Conte received me for almost an hour yesterday afternoon, February 1. We again met in the shade of a banyan tree in the parking lot of the burned-out Palais des Nations, a large edifice that housed the Presidency until it was destroyed in the 1996 mutiny. This is Conte's preferred setting: outdoors, under a tree, with a steady breeze. Conte holds court like a village chief, and this setting is the closest thing to a village in downtown Conakry.

¶3. (C) When I arrived, President Conte was sitting in an old leather armchair, with President of the National Assembly Aboubacar Sompore, President of the Supreme Court Lamine Sidime, and President of the Economic and Social Council Michel Kamano sitting around him in white plastic chairs. Business crony Mamadou Sylla had enthroned himself on a low retaining wall. The atmosphere was gloomy. Another business crony, Guido Santullo, wandered by and took a seat toward the end of the meeting. No one spoke except Conte and me.

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IT HAPPENS EVERYWHERE  
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¶4. (C) After offering New Year's greetings, I referred to the recent general strike as a Guinean matter that the Guineans themselves needed to resolve. I added, however, that the United States considered itself a friend of Guinea and wanted to be helpful if it could.

¶5. (C) President Conte replied that Guinea is a difficult country to govern, because Guineans are proud. He gave a negative connotation to the word &proud,8 implying that Guineans are too proud to yield or compromise. Conte said that before Guineans could get along with each other they

first had to accept each other.<sup>8</sup> He asserted that every family and every nation has quarrels. It happens everywhere. Guinea is no exception. He said Guinea would have to settle this quarrel itself; its friends, including the United States, could only play a supporting role (Vous pouvez venir en appoint, c'est tout.).

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THEY ARE TESTING ME  
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¶16. (C) When I referred again to the strike, President Conte cited a traditional proverb: "they have thrown dust in the air to see which way the wind is blowing<sup>8</sup> (that is, the protesters are testing him to see how far they can push him).

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IT'S NOT OUR FAULT  
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¶17. (C) I told President Conte that no one was attacking him personally. That said, life is tough for most Guineans. Frustrations are running high. Guineans are not demanding much. All they want is a normal existence: the chance to work, to raise a family, and to put food on the table. They want hope.

¶18. (C) President Conte responded with an archaic ideological jab about how Africans continue to suffer from colonial domination.<sup>8</sup> Africans are not at fault, he claimed. Westerners are at the root of Africa's problems.

¶19. (C) Feigning offense, I took exception, noting that the

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United States had never possessed colonies in Africa and had never dominated the continent. President Conte took the point, adding that even before colonialism Africans had been dominating other Africans. He said: "If I want something from my neighbor, I will try to get it. Africans and African countries have always behaved that way.<sup>8</sup>

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THEY SHOULD RETURN TO THEIR VILLAGES  
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¶10. (C) I said that, on January 22, I had seen with my own eyes thousands of demonstrators as they passed by the embassy heading downtown. I told President Conte that these were not the hoodlums who had been throwing rocks and burning tires earlier in the strike; rather, these were ordinary Guineans, upstanding citizens frustrated with their current plight and wanting a decent life.

¶11. (C) President Conte replied, "they shouldn't be here; they are young people who abandoned their villages thinking life would be easier in the city; they're wrong; life is easier in the village; they should go back.<sup>8</sup>

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FATHER OF THE NATION  
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¶12. (C) I tried to appeal to President Conte's paternalistic instincts as the "father of the nation<sup>8</sup> for the past 23 years. Conte interrupted, "so you think I've been around too long?<sup>8</sup> He then digressed into a long discourse about how term limits do not work in Africa. Once a chief, always a chief, he said.

¶13. (C) I said that was not my point. Rather, as "father of the nation,<sup>8</sup> he had a paternal responsibility to bring together all the sons and daughters of Guinea. If ever Guineans needed to unite for the good of their country, it was now, I said. I urged him to try to build consensus.

¶14. (C) President Conte repeated that quarrels happen in all families and all countries. He said that Guineans had quarreled before and that this time was no different.

¶15. (C) I countered that this time was, in fact, different. Guineans had killed Guineans. Throughout my stay in Guinea, Guineans had told me they were different, that they would never kill each other, that Guinea was not Liberia or Sierra Leone. Recent events, especially the shootings on January 22, had proven otherwise. Guineans had killed other Guineans by the dozens. They had violated their own values; they had violated an important taboo.

¶16. (C) Incredibly, President Conte denied that any Guinean had killed a fellow Guinean on purpose. He maintained that the deaths had been caused by stray bullets. (Either he was lying, or no one has told him what really happened on January 22.)

¶17. (C) I urged President Conte to hold the killers accountable. If not, then they would feel free to kill again. If not, others would also feel free to kill. I said the last thing Guinea needed was to succumb to a downward spiral of violence.

¶18. (C) President Conte appeared not to realize the depth of popular discontent or the extent of last week's bloodshed. He responded that Guineans had, in fact, killed each other in the past and that Guinea would survive this time, too.

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CONTE WILL RETIRE FROM THE MILITARY WHEN HE IS NO LONGER  
PRESIDENT  
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¶19. (C) Next, I tried to gauge how much President Conte was focusing on appointing a new prime minister. I recalled that he had once told me that he was a farmer, a general, and a president. He smiled and nodded. I said that as commander in chief, he had several subordinate generals, a bunch of colonels, and many other soldiers to carry out his orders. As President of the Republic, it was also important for him to have civilians -- a prime minister and ministers -- to carry out his policies.

¶20. (C) President Conte did not take the bait. He again digressed, saying that he was not the president of the military but rather the president of all Guineans. I agreed. He said that he had never resigned from the military but would do so when he was no longer president. &When I am no longer president or when they (the military) no longer want

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me to be president, then I will resign from the military, go to my village, and not look back,8 he asserted.

¶21. (C) I replied that, as of now, he remained both commander in chief of the armed forces and President of the Republic. I tried again to determine whether he was focusing on the need to appoint a new prime minister and government to assist him in his role as president. Conte would not engage in this line of discussion; he began to reminisce about how he had traveled to every village in Guinea when he was paymaster for the army in the early 1960s.

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HEALTH  
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¶22. (C) President Conte was alert throughout the meeting. Obviously tired and worn by age and disease, he nonetheless focused on the conversation most of the time (this is not always the case). He seemed to enjoy the banter, even when I contradicted him, but he always made certain he had the last word.

¶23. (C) He was barefoot and hung his right leg over the arm of his chair for much of the meeting. He stood up (with a little help) and then walked (unassisted and barefoot) about thirty feet to the outhouse. He then returned (unassisted) and sat down. He smoked less than usual. His personal hygiene continues to deteriorate.

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COMMENT  
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¶24. (C) President Conte is a tired old man whose time has come and gone. The world has passed him by even though he is still in office. President Conte is no longer up to his leadership responsibilities. He is not -- and evidently never has been -- a man with world view or a view of the future.

¶25. (C) President Conte does not seem to comprehend the groundswell of popular support for change. He is in a state of denial. (He is not alone in this regard.) He minimized the importance of the recent general strike, mass demonstration, and killing of at least 59 people by the security forces. He appeared to think that the same old recipes would still work today. (He is not alone in that regard either.)

¶26. (C) President Conte evidenced no sense of urgency to appoint a prime minister. That said, he holds his cards close to this chest, and he makes decisions according to his own timing. We can only hope that the Presidents of the National Assembly, Supreme Court, and Economic and Social Council, who were meeting with Conte when I arrived, were trying to nudge him towards the timely selection of a new prime minister. The atmosphere was gloomy, however, when I arrived.

¶27. (C) The presence of Mamadou Sylla and Guido Santullo is not encouraging. President Conte continues to meld his official and personal worlds. He appears to have no disinterested advisors. He seeks solace in the spirit world; his marabouts had performed sacrifices for him shortly before my arrival.  
MCDONALD